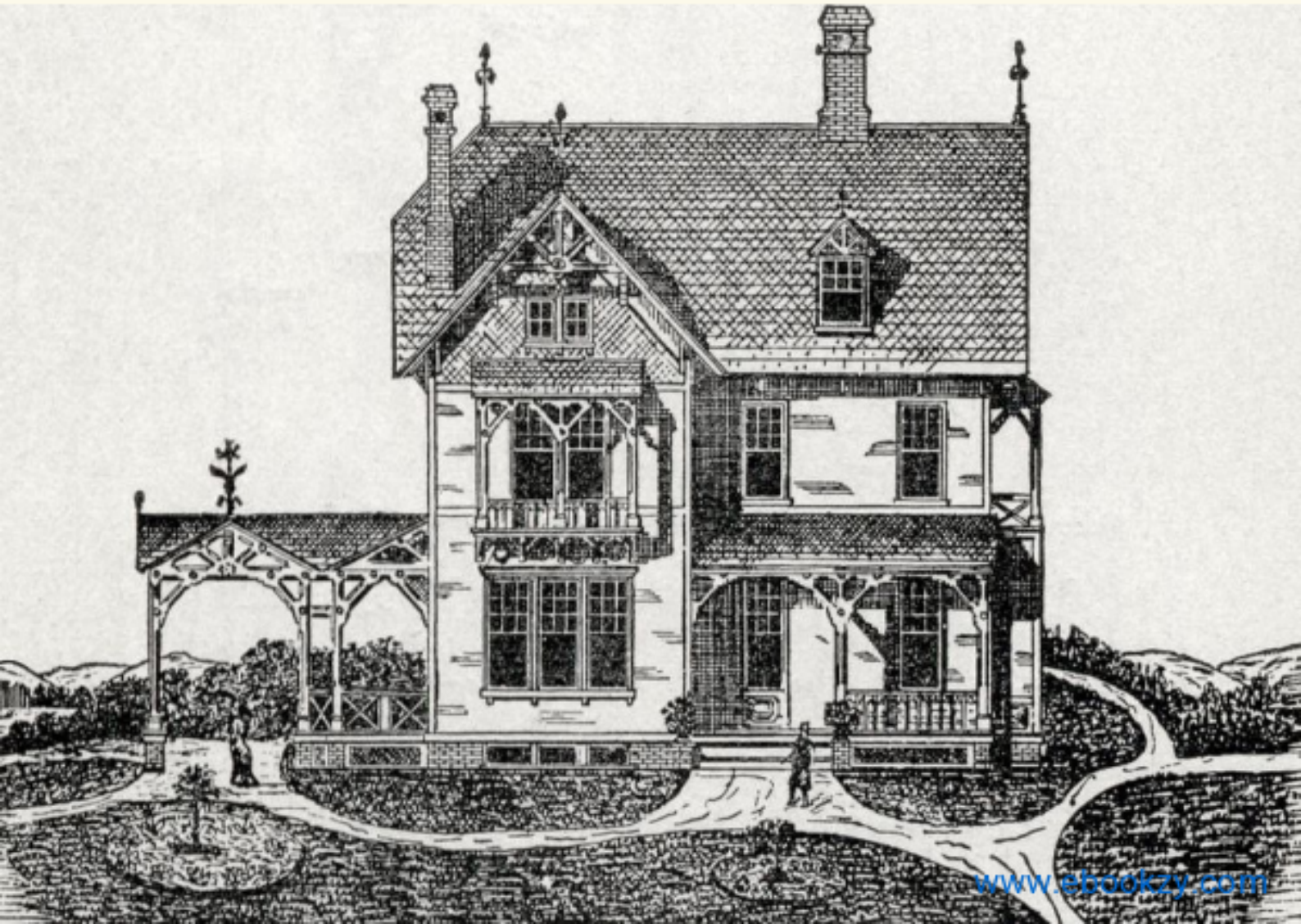
THE BALLAD OF READING GAOL

By Oscar Wilde



www.ebookzy.com

Published by Ebookzy. Visit the site to download free ebooks.

This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0.

The Ballad of Reading Gaol By Oscar Wilde

THE BALLAD OF READING GAOL

By Oscar Wilde

In Memoriam

C.T.W.
Sometime Trooper of the Royal Horse Guards.
Obiit H.M. Prison, Reading, Berkshire,

July 7th, 1896
Presented by Project Gutenberg on the 99th Anniversary.

VERSION ONE

I. He did not wear his scarlet coat, For blood and wine are red, And blood and wine were on his hands When they found him with the dead, The poor dead woman whom he loved, And murdered in her bed.
He walked amongst the Trial Men In a suit of shabby grey; A cricket cap was on his head, And his step seemed light and gay; But I never saw a man who looked So wistfully at the day. I never saw a man who

VERSION TWO

I He did not wear his scarlet coat, For blood and wine are red, And blood and wine were on his hands When they found him with the dead, The poor dead woman whom he loved, And murdered in her bed.
He walked amongst the Trial Men In a suit of shabby gray; A cricket cap was on his head, And his step seemed light and gay; But I never saw a man who looked So wistfully at the day. I never saw a man who

looked With such a wistful eye Upon that little tent of blue Which prisoners call the sky, And at every drifting cloud that went With sails of silver by. I walked, with other souls in pain, Within another ring, And was wondering if the man had done A great or little thing, When a voice behind me whispered low, "That fellow's got to swing." Dear Christ! the very prison walls Suddenly seemed to reel, And the sky above my head became Like a casque of scorching steel; And, though I was a soul in pain, My pain I could not feel. I only knew what hunted thought Quickened his step, and why He looked upon the garish day With such a wistful eye; The man had killed the thing he loved And so he had to die. Yet each man kills the thing he loves By each let this be heard, Some do it with a bitter look, Some with a flattering word, The coward does it with a kiss, The brave man with a sword! Some kill their love when they are young, And some when they are old; Some strangle with the hands of Lust, Some with the hands of Gold: The kindest use a knife, because The dead so soon grow cold. Some love too little, some too long, Some sell, and others buy; Some do the deed with many tears, And some without a sigh: For each man kills the thing he loves, Yet each man does not die. He does not die a death of shame On a day of dark disgrace, Nor have a noose about his neck, Nor a cloth upon his face, Nor drop feet foremost through the floor Into an empty place He does not sit with silent men Who watch him night and day; Who watch him when he tries to weep, And when he tries to pray; Who watch him lest himself should rob The prison of its prey. He does not wake at dawn to see Dread

looked With such a wistful eye Upon that little tent of blue Which prisoners call the sky, And at every drifting cloud that went With sails of silver by. I walked, with other souls in pain, Within another ring, And was wondering if the man had done A great or little thing, When a voice behind me whispered low, "That fellow's got to swing." Dear Christ! the very prison walls Suddenly seemed to reel, And the sky above my head became Like a casque of scorching steel; And, though I was a soul in pain, My pain I could not feel. I only knew what haunted thought Quickened his step, and why He looked upon the garish day With such a wistful eye; The man had killed the thing he loved, And so he had to die. Yet each man kills the thing he loves, By each let this be heard, Some do it with a bitter look, Some with a flattering word, The coward does it with a kiss, The brave man with a sword! Some kill their love when they are young, And some when they are old; Some strangle with the hands of Lust, Some with the hands of Gold: The kindest use a knife, because The dead so soon grow cold. Some love too little, some too long, Some sell, and others buy; Some do the deed with many tears, And some without a sigh: For each man kills the thing he loves, Yet each man does not die. He does not die a death of shame On a day of dark disgrace, Nor have a noose about his neck, Nor a cloth upon his face, Nor drop feet foremost through the floor Into an empty space. He does not sit with silent men Who watch him night and day; Who watch him when he tries to weep, And when he tries to pray; Who watch him lest himself should rob The prison of its prey. He does not wake at dawn to see Dread

figures throng his room, The shivering Chaplain robed in white, The Sheriff stern with gloom, And the Governor all in shiny black, With the yellow face of Doom. He does not rise in piteous haste To put on convict-clothes, While some coarse-mouthed Doctor gloats, and notes Each new and nerve-twitched pose, Fingering a watch whose little ticks Are like horrible hammer-blows. He does not know that sickening thirst That sands one's throat, before The hangman with his gardener's gloves Slips through the padded door, And binds one with three leathern thongs, That the throat may thirst no more. He does not bend his head to hear The Burial Office read, Nor, while the terror of his soul Tells him he is not dead, Cross his own coffin, as he moves Into the hideous shed. He does not stare upon the air Through a little roof of glass; He does not pray with lips of clay For his agony to pass; Nor feel upon his shuddering cheek The kiss of Caiaphas. II. Six weeks our guardsman walked the yard, In a suit of shabby grey: His cricket cap was on his head, And his step seemed light and gay, But I never saw a man who looked So wistfully at the day. I never saw a man who looked With such a wistful eye Upon that little tent of blue Which prisoners call the sky, And at every wandering cloud that trailed Its raveled fleeces by. He did not wring his hands, as do Those witless men who dare To try to rear the changeling Hope In the cave of black Despair: He only looked upon the sun, And drank the morning air. He did not wring his hands nor weep, Nor did he peek or pine, But he drank the air as though it held Some healthful anodyne; With open mouth he drank the sun As though it had been wine!

figures throng his room, The shivering Chaplain robed in white, The Sheriff stern with gloom, And the Governor all in shiny black, With the yellow face of Doom. He does not rise in piteous haste To put on convict-clothes, While some coarse-mouthed Doctor gloats, and notes Each new and nerve-twitched pose, Fingering a watch whose little ticks Are like horrible hammer-blows. He does not feel that sickening thirst That sands one's throat, before The hangman with his gardener's gloves Comes through the padded door, And binds one with three leathern thongs, That the throat may thirst no more. He does not bend his head to hear The Burial Office read, Nor, while the anguish of his soul Tells him he is not dead, Cross his own coffin, as he moves Into the hideous shed. He does not stare upon the air Through a little roof of glass: He does not pray with lips of clay For his agony to pass; Nor feel upon his shuddering cheek The kiss of Caiaphas. II Six weeks the guardsman walked the yard, In the suit of shabby gray: His cricket cap was on his head, And his step was light and gay, But I never saw a man who looked So wistfully at the day. I never saw a man who looked With such a wistful eye Upon that little tent of blue Which prisoners call the sky, And at every wandering cloud that trailed Its ravelled fleeces by. He did not wring his hands, as do Those witless men who dare To try to rear the changeling Hope In the cave of black Despair: He only looked upon the sun, And drank the morning air. He did not wring his hands nor weep, Nor did he peek or pine, But he drank the air as though it held Some healthful anodyne; With open mouth he drank the sun As though it had

And I and all the souls in pain, Who been wine! And I and all the souls in pain,
tramped the other ring, Forgot if we Who tramped the other ring, Forgot if we
ourselves had done A great or little thing, ourselves had done A great or little thing,
And watched with gaze of dull amaze The And watched with gaze of dull amaze The
man who had to swing. And strange it was man who had to swing. For strange it was
to see him pass With a step so light and to see him pass With a step so light and
gay, And strange it was to see him look So gay, And strange it was to see him look So
wistfully at the day, And strange it was to wistfully at the day, And strange it was to
think that he Had such a debt to pay. For think that he Had such a debt to pay. The
oak and elm have pleasant leaves That in oak and elm have pleasant leaves That in
the spring-time shoot: But grim to see is the the spring-time shoot: But grim to see is the
gallows-tree, With its adder-bitten root, gallows-tree, With its alder-bitten root,
And, green or dry, a man must die Before it And, green or dry, a man must die Before it
bears its fruit! The loftiest place is that seat bears its fruit! The loftiest place is the seat
of grace For which all worldlings try: But of grace For which all worldlings try: But
who would stand in hempen band Upon a who would stand in hempen band Upon a
scaffold high, And through a murderer's scaffold high, And through a murderer's
collar take His last look at the sky? It is collar take His last look at the sky? It is
sweet to dance to violins When Love and sweet to dance to violins When Love and
Life are fair: To dance to flutes, to dance to Life are fair: To dance to flutes, to dance to
lutes Is delicate and rare: But it is not lutes Is delicate and rare: But it is not
sweet with nimble feet To dance upon the sweet with nimble feet To dance upon the
air! So with curious eyes and sick surmise air! So with curious eyes and sick surmise
We watched him day by day, And We watched him day by day, And
wondered if each one of us Would end the wondered if each one of us Would end the
self-same way, For none can tell to what self-same way, For none can tell to what
red Hell His sightless soul may stray. At red Hell His sightless soul may stray. At
last the dead man walked no more Amongst last the dead man walked no more Amongst
the Trial Men, And I knew that he was the Trial Men, And I knew that he was
standing up In the black dock's dreadful standing up In the black dock's dreadful
pen, And that never would I see his face In pen, And that never would I see his face
God's sweet world again. Like two For weal or woe again. Like two doomed
doomed ships that pass in storm We had ships that pass in storm We had crossed
crossed each other's way: But we made no each other's way: But we made no sign, we
sign, we said no word, We had no word to said no word, We had no word to say; For
say; For we did not meet in the holy night, we did not meet in the holy night, But in the
But in the shameful day. A prison wall was shameful day. A prison wall was round us
round us both, Two outcast men were we: both, Two outcast men we were: The
The world had thrust us from its heart, And world had thrust us from its heart, And God
God from out His care: And the iron gin from out His care: And the iron gin that
that waits for Sin Had caught us in its waits for Sin Had caught us in its snare. III

snare. III In Debtors' Yard the stones are hard, And the dripping wall is high, So it was there he took the air Beneath the leaden sky, And by each side a Warder walked, For fear the man might die. Or else he sat with those who watched His anguish night and day; Who watched him when he rose to weep, And when he crouched to pray; Who watched him lest himself should rob Their scaffold of its prey. The Governor was strong upon The Regulations Act: The Doctor said that Death was but A scientific fact: And twice a day the Chaplain called And left a little tract. And twice a day he smoked his pipe, And drank his quart of beer: His soul was resolute, and held No hiding-place for fear; He often said that he was glad The hangman's hands were near. But why he said so strange a thing No Warder dared to ask: For he to whom a watcher's doom Is given as his task, Must set a lock upon his lips, And make his face a mask. Or else he might be moved, and try To comfort or console: And what should Human Pity do Pent up in Murderers' Hole? What word of grace in such a place Could help a brother's soul? With slouch and swing around the ring We trod the Fool's Parade! We did not care: we knew we were The Devil's Own Brigade: And shaven head and feet of lead Make a merry masquerade. We tore the tarry rope to shreds With blunt and bleeding nails; We rubbed the doors, and scrubbed the floors, And cleaned the shining rails: And, rank by rank, we soaped the plank, And clattered with the pails. We sewed the sacks, we broke the stones, We turned the dusty drill: We banged the tins, and bawled the hymns, And sweated on the mill: But in the heart of every man Terror was lying still. So still it

In Debtors' Yard the stones are hard, And the dripping wall is high, So it was there he took the air Beneath the leaden sky, And by each side a warder walked, For fear the man might die. Or else he sat with those who watched His anguish night and day; Who watched him when he rose to weep, And when he crouched to pray; Who watched him lest himself should rob Their scaffold of its prey. The Governor was strong upon The Regulations Act: The Doctor said that Death was but A scientific fact: And twice a day the Chaplain called, And left a little tract. And twice a day he smoked his pipe, And drank his quart of beer: His soul was resolute, and held No hiding-place for fear; He often said that he was glad The hangman's day was near. But why he said so strange a thing No warder dared to ask: For he to whom a watcher's doom Is given as his task, Must set a lock upon his lips, And make his face a mask. Or else he might be moved, and try To comfort or console: And what should Human Pity do Pent up in Murderers' Hole? What word of grace in such a place Could help a brother's soul? With slouch and swing around the ring We trod the Fools' Parade! We did not care: we knew we were The Devils' Own Brigade: And shaven head and feet of lead Make a merry masquerade. We tore the tarry rope to shreds With blunt and bleeding nails; We rubbed the doors, and scrubbed the floors, And cleaned the shining rails: And, rank by rank, we soaped the plank, And clattered with the pails. We sewed the sacks, we broke the stones, We turned the dusty drill: We banged the tins, and bawled the hymns, And sweated on the mill: But in the heart of every man Terror was lying still. So still it

of every man Terror was lying still. So still lay that every day Crawled like a weed-
it lay that every day Crawled like a weed- clogged wave: And we forgot the bitter lot
clogged wave: And we forgot the bitter lot That waits for fool and knave, Till once, as
That waits for fool and knave, Till once, as we tramped in from work, We passed an
we tramped in from work, We passed an open grave. With yawning mouth the horrid
open grave. With yawning mouth the hole Gaped for a living thing; The very
yellow hole Gaped for a living thing; The mud cried out for blood To the thirsty
very mud cried out for blood To the thirsty asphalte ring: And we knew that ere one
asphalte ring: And we knew that ere one dawn grew fair The fellow had to swing.
dawn grew fair Some prisoner had to Right in we went, with soul intent On
swing. Right in we went, with soul intent Death and Dread and Doom: The hangman,
On Death and Dread and Doom: The with his little bag, Went shuffling through
hangman, with his little bag, Went shuffling the gloom: And I trembled as I groped my
through the gloom And each man trembled way Into my numbered tomb. That night the
as he crept Into his numbered tomb. That empty corridors Were full of forms of Fear,
night the empty corridors Were full of And up and down the iron town Stole feet
forms of Fear, And up and down the iron we could not hear, And through the bars
town Stole feet we could not hear, And that hide the stars White faces seemed to
through the bars that hide the stars White peer. He lay as one who lies and dreams In
faces seemed to peer. He lay as one who a pleasant meadow-land, The watchers
lies and dreams In a pleasant meadow- watched him as he slept, And could not
land, The watcher watched him as he slept, understand How one could sleep so sweet
And could not understand How one could a sleep With a hangman close at hand. But
sleep so sweet a sleep With a hangman there is no sleep when men must weep
close at hand? But there is no sleep when Who never yet have wept: So we- the fool,
men must weep Who never yet have wept: the fraud, the knave- That endless vigil
So we—the fool, the fraud, the knave— kept, And through each brain on hands of
That endless vigil kept, And through each pain Another's terror crept. Alas! it is a
brain on hands of pain Another's terror fearful thing To feel another's guilt! For,
crept. Alas! it is a fearful thing To feel right within, the sword of Sin Pierced to its
another's guilt! For, right within, the sword poisoned hilt, And as molten lead were the
of Sin Pierced to its poisoned hilt, And as tears we shed For the blood we had not
molten lead were the tears we shed For the spilt. The warders with their shoes of felt
blood we had not spilt. The Warders with Crept by each padlocked door, And peeped
their shoes of felt Crept by each padlocked and saw, with eyes of awe, Gray figures on
door, And peeped and saw, with eyes of the floor, And wondered why men knelt to
awe, Grey figures on the floor, And pray Who never prayed before. All through
wondered why men knelt to pray Who the night we knelt and prayed, Mad
never prayed before. All through the night mourners of a corse! The troubled plumes
we knelt and prayed, Mad mourners of a of midnight shook Like the plumes upon a
corpse! The troubled plumes of midnight hearse: And as bitter wine upon a sponge

were The plumes upon a hearse: And bitter Was the savour of Remorse. The gray cock wine upon a sponge Was the savior of crew, the red cock crew, But never came Remorse. The cock crew, the red cock the day: And crooked shapes of Terror crew, But never came the day: And crouched, In the corners where we lay: crooked shape of Terror crouched, In the And each evil sprite that walks by night corners where we lay: And each evil sprite Before us seemed to play. They glided that walks by night Before us seemed to past, the glided fast, Like travellers through play. They glided past, they glided fast, a mist: They mocked the moon in a Like travelers through a mist: They mocked rigadoon Of delicate turn and twist, And the moon in a rigadoon Of delicate turn and with formal pace and loathsome grace The twist, And with formal pace and loathsome phantoms kept their tryst. With mop and grace The phantoms kept their tryst. With mow, we saw them go, Slim shadows hand mop and mow, we saw them go, Slim in hand: About, about, in ghostly rout They shadows hand in hand: About, about, in trod a saraband: And the damned ghostly rout They trod a saraband: And the grotesques made arabesques, Like the wind damned grotesques made arabesques, Like upon the sand! With the pirouettes of the wind upon the sand! With the pirouettes marionettes, They tripped on pointed tread: of marionettes, They tripped on pointed But with flutes of Fear they filled the ear, tread: But with flutes of Fear they filled the As their grisly masque they led, And loud ear, As their grisly masque they led, And they sang, and long they sang, For they sang loud they sang, and loud they sang, For they to wake the dead. "Oho!" they cried, "the sang to wake the dead. "Oho!" they cried, world is wide, But fettered limbs go lame! "The world is wide, But fettered limbs go And once, or twice, to throw the dice Is a lame! And once, or twice, to throw the gentlemanly game, But he does not win dice Is a gentlemanly game, But he does who plays with Sin In the secret House of not win who plays with Sin In the secret Shame." No things of air these antics were, House of Shame." No things of air these That frolicked with such glee: To men antics were That frolicked with such glee: whose lives were held in gyves, And To men whose lives were held in gyves, whose feet might not go free, Ah! wounds And whose feet might not go free, Ah! of Christ! they were living things, Most wounds of Christ! they were living things, terrible to see. Around, around, they Most terrible to see. Around, around, they waltzed and wound; Some wheeled in waltzed and wound; Some wheeled in smirking pairs; With the mincing step of a smirking pairs: With the mincing step of demirep Some sidled up the stairs: And demirep Some sidled up the stairs: And with subtle sneer, and fawning leer, Each with subtle sneer, and fawning leer, Each helped us at our prayers. The morning wind helped us at our prayers. The morning began to moan, But still the night went on: wind began to moan, But still the night Through its giant loom the web of gloom went on: Through its giant loom the web of Crept till each thread was spun: And, as gloom Crept till each thread was spun: we prayed, we grew afraid Of the Justice And, as we prayed, we grew afraid Of the of the Sun. The moaning wind went

Justice of the Sun. The moaning wind went wandering round The weeping prison wall: wandering round The weeping prison- Till like a wheel of turning steel We felt the wall: Till like a wheel of turning-steel We minutes crawl: O moaning wind! what had felt the minutes crawl: O moaning wind! we done To have such a seneschal? At last what had we done To have such a I saw the shadowed bars, Like a lattice seneschal? At last I saw the shadowed bars wrought in lead, Move right across the Like a lattice wrought in lead, Move right whitewashed wall That faced my three- across the whitewashed wall That faced plank bed, And I knew that somewhere in my three-plank bed, And I knew that the world God's dreadful dawn was red. At somewhere in the world God's dreadful six o'clock we cleaned our cells, At seven dawn was red. At six o'clock we cleaned all was still, But the sough and swing of a our cells, At seven all was still, But the mighty wing The prison seemed to fill, For sough and swing of a mighty wing The the Lord of Death with icy breath Had prison seemed to fill, For the Lord of entered in to kill. He did not pass in purple Death with icy breath Had entered in to pomp, Nor ride a moon-white steed. Three kill. He did not pass in purple pomp, Nor yards of cord and a sliding board Are all ride a moon-white steed. Three yards of the gallows' need: So with rope of shame cord and a sliding board Are all the the Herald came To do the secret deed. We gallows' need: So with rope of shame the were as men who through a fen Of filthy Herald came To do the secret deed. We darkness grope: We did not dare to breathe were as men who through a fen Of filthy a prayer, Or to give our anguish scope: darkness grope: We did not dare to breathe Something was dead in each of us, And a prayer, Or give our anguish scope: what was dead was Hope. For Man's grim Something was dead in each of us, And Justice goes its way And will not swerve what was dead was Hope. For Man's grim aside: It slays the weak, it slays the strong, Justice goes its way, And will not swerve It has a deadly stride: With iron heel it aside: It slays the weak, it slays the strong, slays the strong The monstrous parricide! It has a deadly stride: With iron heel it We waited for the stroke of eight: Each slays the strong, The monstrous parricide! tongue was thick with thirst: For the stroke We waited for the stroke of eight: Each of eight is the stroke of Fate That makes a tongue was thick with thirst: For the stroke man accursed, And Fate will use a running of eight is the stroke of Fate That makes a noose For the best man and the worst. We man accursed, And Fate will use a running had no other thing to do, Save to wait for noose For the best man and the worst. We the sign to come: So, like things of stone in had no other thing to do, Save to wait for a valley lone, Quiet we sat and dumb: But the sign to come: So, like things of stone in each man's heart beat thick and quick, Like a valley lone, Quiet we sat and dumb: But a madman on a drum! With sudden shock each man's heart beat thick and quick Like the prison-clock Smote on the shivering air, a madman on a drum! With sudden shock And from all the gaol rose up a wail Of the prison-clock Smote on the shivering impotent despair, Like the sound the air, And from all the gaol rose up a wail Of frightened marshes hear From some leper

impotent despair, Like the sound that frightened marshes hear From a leper in his lair. And as one sees most fearful things In the crystal of a dream, We saw the greasy hempen rope Hooked to the blackened beam, And heard the prayer the hangman's snare Strangled into a scream. And all the woe that moved him so That he gave that bitter cry, And the wild regrets, and the bloody sweats, None knew so well as I: For he who live more lives than one More deaths than one must die. IV. There is no chapel on the day On which they hang a man: The Chaplain's heart is far too sick, Or his face is far to wan, Or there is that written in his eyes Which none should look upon. So they kept us close till nigh on noon, And then they rang the bell, And the Warders with their jingling keys Opened each listening cell, And down the iron stair we tramped, Each from his separate Hell. Out into God's sweet air we went, But not in wonted way, For this man's face was white with fear, And that man's face was grey, And I never saw sad men who looked So wistfully at the day. I never saw sad men who looked With such a wistful eye Upon that little tent of blue We prisoners called the sky, And at every careless cloud that passed In happy freedom by. But there were those amongst us all Who walked with downcast head, And knew that, had each got his due, They should have died instead: He had but killed a thing that lived Whilst they had killed the dead. For he who sins a second time Wakes a dead soul to pain, And draws it from its spotted shroud, And makes it bleed again, And makes it bleed great gouts of blood And makes it bleed in vain! Like ape or clown, in monstrous garb With crooked arrows

in his lair. And as one sees most fearful things In the crystal of a dream, We saw the greasy hempen rope Hooked to the blackened beam, And heard the prayer the hangman's snare Strangled into a scream. And all the woe that moved him so That he gave that bitter cry, And the wild regrets, and the bloody sweats, None knew so well as I: For he who lives more lives than one More deaths that one must die. IV There is no chapel on the day On which they hang a man: The Chaplain's heart is far too sick, Or his face is far too wan, Or there is that written in his eyes Which none should look upon. So they kept us close till nigh on noon, And then they rang the bell, And the warders with their jingling keys Opened each listening cell, And down the iron stair we tramped, Each from his separate Hell. Out into God's sweet air we went, But not in wonted way, For this man's face was white with fear, And that man's face was gray, And I never saw sad men who looked So wistfully at the day. I never saw sad men who looked With such a wistful eye Upon that little tent of blue We prisoners called the sky, And at every happy cloud that passed In such strange freedom by. But there were those amongst us all Who walked with downcast head, And knew that, had each got his due, They should have died instead: He had but killed a thing that lived, Whilst they had killed the dead. For he who sins a second time Wakes a dead soul to pain, And draws it from its spotted shroud And makes it bleed again, And makes it bleed great gouts of blood, And makes it bleed in vain! Like ape or clown, in monstrous garb With crooked arrows starred, Silently we went round and round The slippery asphalte yard; Silently

starred, Silently we went round and round The slippery asphalte yard; Silently we went round and round, And no man spoke a word. Silently we went round and round, And through each hollow mind The word. Silently we went round and round, Memory of dreadful things Rushed like a And through each hollow mind The dreadful wind, And Horror stalked before memory of dreadful things Rushed like a each man, And Terror crept behind. The dreadful wind, An Horror stalked before warders strutted up and down, And each man, And terror crept behind. The watched their herd of brutes, Their Warders strutted up and down, And kept uniforms were spick and span, And they their herd of brutes, Their uniforms were wore their Sunday suits, But we knew the spick and span, And they wore their work they had been at, By the quicklime on Sunday suits, But we knew the work they their boots. For where a grave had opened had been at By the quicklime on their wide, There was no grave at all: Only a boots. For where a grave had opened stretch of mud and sand By the hideous wide, There was no grave at all: Only a prison-wall, And a little heap of burning stretch of mud and sand By the hideous lime, That the man should have his pall. prison-wall, And a little heap of burning For he has a pall, this wretched man, Such lime, That the man should have his pall. as few men can claim: Deep down below a For he has a pall, this wretched man, Such prison-yard, Naked, for greater shame, He as few men can claim: Deep down below a lies, with fetters on each foot, Wrapt in a prison-yard, Naked for greater shame, He sheet of flame! And all the while the lies, with fetters on each foot, Wrapt in a burning lime Eats flesh and bone away, It sheet of flame! And all the while the eats the brittle bones by night, And the soft burning lime Eats flesh and bone away, It flesh by day, It eats the flesh and bone by eats the brittle bone by night, And the soft turns, But it eats the heart alway. For three flesh by the day, It eats the flesh and bones long years they will not sow Or root or by turns, But it eats the heart alway. For seedling there: For three long years the three long years they will not sow Or root unblessed spot Will sterile be and bare, or seedling there: For three long years the And look upon the wondering sky With unblessed spot Will sterile be and bare, unreproachful stare. They think a And look upon the wondering sky With murderer's heart would taint Each simple unreproachful stare. They think a seed they sow. It is not true! God's kindly murderer's heart would taint Each simple earth Is kindlier than men know, And the seed they sow. It is not true! God's kindly red rose would but glow more red, The earth Is kindlier than men know, And the white rose whiter blow. Out of his mouth a red rose would but blow more red, The red, red rose! Out of his heart a white! For white rose whiter blow. Out of his mouth a who can say by what strange way, Christ red, red rose! Out of his heart a white! For brings His will to light, Since the barren who can say by what strange way, Christ staff the pilgrim bore Bloomed in the great brings his will to light, Since the barren Pope's sight? But neither milk-white rose staff the pilgrim bore Bloomed in the great nor red May bloom in prison air; The

Pope's sight? But neither milk-white rose nor red May bloom in prison air; The shard, the pebble, and the flint, Are what they give us there: For flowers have been known to heal A common man's despair. So never will wine-red rose or white, Petal by petal, fall On that stretch of mud and sand that lies By the hideous prison-wall, To tell the men who tramp the yard That God's Son died for all. Yet though the hideous prison-wall Still hems him round and round, And a spirit may not walk by night That is with fetters bound, And a spirit may but weep that lies In such unholy ground, He is at peace- this wretched man- At peace, or will be soon: There is no thing to make him mad, Nor does Terror walk at noon, For the lampless Earth in which he lies Has neither Sun nor Moon. They hanged him as a beast is hanged: They did not even toll A requiem that might have brought Rest to his startled soul, But hurriedly they took him out, And hid him in a hole. The warders stripped him of his clothes, And gave him to the flies: They mocked the swollen purple throat, And the stark and staring eyes: And with laughter loud they heaped the shroud In which the convict lies. The Chaplain would not kneel to pray By his dishonoured grave: Nor mark it with that blessed Cross That Christ for sinners gave, Because the man was one of those Whom Christ came down to save. Yet all is well; he has but passed To Life's appointed bourne: And alien tears will fill for him Pity's long-broken urn, For his mourners be outcast men, And outcasts always mourn. V I know not whether Laws be right, Or whether Laws be wrong; All that we know who lie in gaol Is that the wall is strong; And that each day is like a year, A year whose days are long. But this I know, that every Law That men have made for Man,

year, A year whose days are long. But this I know, that every Law That men have made for Man, Since first Man took his brother's life, And the sad world began, But straws the wheat and saves the chaff With a most evil fan. This too I know—and wise it were If each could know the same — That every prison that men build Is built with bricks of shame, And bound with bars lest Christ should see How men their brothers maim. With bars they blur the gracious moon, And blind the goodly sun: And they do well to hide their Hell, For in it things are done That Son of God nor son of Man Ever should look upon! The vilest deeds like poison weeds Bloom well in prison-air: It is only what is good in Man That wastes and withers there: Pale Anguish keeps the heavy gate, And the Warder is Despair For they starve the little frightened child Till it weeps both night and day: And they scourge the weak, and flog the fool, And gibe the old and grey, And some grow mad, and all grow bad, And none a word may say. Each narrow cell in which we dwell Is a foul and dark latrine, And the fetid breath of living Death Chokes up each grated screen, And all, but Lust, is turned to dust In Humanity's machine. The brackish water that we drink Creeps with a loathsome slime, And the bitter bread they weigh in scales Is full of chalk and lime, And Sleep will not lie down, but walks Wild-eyed and cries to Time. But though lean Hunger and green Thirst Like asp with adder fight, We have little care of prison fare, For what chills and kills outright Is that every stone one lifts by day Becomes one's heart by night. With midnight always in one's heart, And twilight in one's cell, We turn the crank, or tear the rope, Each in his separate Hell, And the silence is more awful far Than the sound of a brazen bell. And never

Since first Man took His brother's life, And the sad world began, But straws the wheat and saves the chaff With a most evil fan. This too I know- and wise it were If each could know the same- That every prison that men build Is built with bricks of shame, And bound with bars lest Christ should see How men their brothers maim. With bars they blur the gracious moon, And blind the goodly sun: And they do well to hide their Hell, For in it things are done That Son of God nor son of Man Ever should look upon! The vilest deeds like poison weeds Bloom well in prison-air: It is only what is good in Man That wastes and withers there: Pale Anguish keeps the heavy gate, And the warder is Despair. For they starve the little frightened child Till it weeps both night and day: And they scourge the weak, and flog the fool, And gibe the old and gray, And some grow mad, and all grow bad, And none a word may say. Each narrow cell in which we dwell Is a foul and dark latrine, And the fetid breath of living Death Chokes up each grated screen, And all, but Lust, is turned to dust In Humanity's machine. The brackish water that we drink Creeps with a loathsome slime, And the bitter bread they weigh in scales Is full of chalk and lime, And Sleep will not lie down, but walks Wild-eyed, and cries to Time. But though lean Hunger and green Thirst Like asp with adder fight, We have little care of prison fare, For what chills and kills outright Is that every stone one lifts by day Becomes one's heart by night. With midnight always in one's heart, And twilight in one's cell, We turn the crank, or tear the rope, Each in his separate Hell, And the silence is more awful far Than the sound of a brazen bell. And never

tear the rope, Each in his separate Hell, And the silence is more awful far Than the sound of a brazen bell. And never a human voice comes near To speak a gentle word: And the eye that watches through the door Is pitiless and hard: And by all forgot, we rot and rot, With soul and body marred. And thus we rust Life's iron chain Degraded and alone: And some men curse, and some men weep, And some men make no moan: But God's eternal Laws are kind And break the heart of stone. And every human heart that breaks, In prison-cell or yard, Is as that broken box that gave Its treasure to the Lord, And filled the unclean leper's house With the scent of costliest nard. Ah! happy day they whose hearts can break And peace of pardon win! How else may man make straight his plan And cleanse his soul from Sin? How else but through a broken heart May Lord Christ enter in? And he of the swollen purple throat, And the stark and staring eyes, Waits for the holy hands that took The Thief to Paradise; And a broken and a contrite heart The Lord will not despise. The man in red who reads the Law Gave him three weeks of life, Three little weeks in which to heal His soul of his soul's strife, And cleanse from every blot of blood The hand that held the knife. And with tears of blood he cleansed the hand, The hand that held the steel: For only blood can wipe out blood, And only tears can heal: And the crimson stain that was of Cain Became Christ's snow-white seal. VI In Reading gaol by Reading town There is a pit of shame, And in it lies a wretched man Eaten by teeth of flame, In a burning winding-sheet he lies, And his grave has got no name. And there, till Christ call forth the dead, In silence let him lie: No need to waste the foolish tear, Or heave the windy sigh: The man had killed the thing he loved,

forth the dead, In silence let him lie: No And so he had to die. And all men kill the need to waste the foolish tear, Or heave the thing they love, By all let this be heard, windy sigh: The man had killed the thing he Some do it with a bitter look, Some with a loved, And so he had to die. And all men flattering word, The coward does it with a kill the thing they love, By all let this be kiss, The brave man with a sword!
heard, Some do it with a bitter look, Some
with a flattering word, The coward does it
with a kiss, The brave man with a sword!